

‘Evaluating role-play in history teaching’

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Eugen Weber once explained the appeal of the work of such historians as Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre by saying that ‘books like these opened vast horizons. Here were new ways of doing history that brought the dead to life. Where historians used to stop on people’s doorsteps, or timidly ventured to study or *salon*, Febvre and Bloch strode in to peer at bedrooms, kitchens, middens, and beyond them at ways folk thought and felt: *mentalités*.’¹ Role-play asks students to consider this level of quotidian human and topographical detail in the past. It helps students to see the world as did those once living in it – through their own words where possible - and thus to understand something of the difference of the past without fetishising the otherness of those who lived there. As my colleague, a medievalist, explained at this conference last year, protagonists in the Middle Ages can seem to our students ‘too chronologically distant to be recognisably human.’² By dwelling on the nature of human relationships in the past (indeed, perhaps being inescapably reduced to them), role-play communicates the humanity of medieval men and women (or, in the case of my own students, French ones) and focuses student minds on the words and actions that were possible in the historical scenario in question. As others before us have found, role-play thus makes students realise that the outcomes of historical crises and processes have not been inevitable, but that ‘[p]eople who live through the actual happenings have difficulty in perceiving a pattern; rather, they often experience a sense of disorder, turbulence, and groping.’³ The sense of inevitability conveyed in textbooks ‘becomes apparent to historians only after the events have occurred’⁴, and is, as my colleague Trish Skinner found in her role-play on the First Crusade, more a product of the ‘hindsightedness of the chronicle materials’⁵ than the nature of the events themselves. What the staged

¹ E. Weber, *My France: politics, culture, myth*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 14

² P. Skinner, ‘Evaluating role-play in history teaching: second interim report’, LTSN conference, Lancaster, April 2003.

³ H. Gorvine, ‘Teaching history through role playing’, *The History Teacher*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1970, p. 7.

⁴ H. Gorvine, ‘Teaching history through role playing’, *The History Teacher*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1970, p. 7.

⁵ P. Skinner, ‘Evaluating role-play in history teaching: second interim report’, LTSN conference, Lancaster, April 2003.

‘groping’ of the role-play exercise can produce is a greater ‘historical-mindedness’⁶ in the student: it can ‘provide students [with] a critical skill that they do not necessarily learn from listening to a lecture: historical perspective’⁷. Finally, role-play necessitates a micro-historical approach in which interrogation of a particular crisis or debate can illuminate the broader historical landscape for the benefit of the student’s deeper understanding. This, at any rate, is what we have been hoping to achieve by using role-play in our history seminars over the period 2001-4.

There seemed to be many pedagogical reasons why the introduction of such role-play exercises made sense. The integration of primary source material into the curriculum and the emphasis on micro-historical episodes aside, educational researchers have argued that role-play sharpens students’ analytical and presentational skills, builds confidence, encourages a shift from ‘fact to factors’ in their investigation of historical problems, and allows students to think beyond the accepted versions of historical developments as they imagine the available choices and mental frameworks which restricted the actions of historical agents.⁸ For us, there were potential practical benefits as well. Our experiments have coincided with the introduction of a revised curriculum that has involved a shift to larger group seminar teaching in double sessions, at least for Year 1 students. Devising ways of ensuring maximum student participation levels in discussion, and developing task-based seminar exercises for them to work through in small groups, suddenly became a more attractive proposition.

To these ends, between October 2001 and June 2004 my colleague, Trish Skinner, and I were supported by an LTSN grant to evaluate the effectiveness of role-play as a teaching tool in History. We are about to complete our experiment, which has involved running the same topic as role-play one year and as a traditional seminar discussion the next, across three undergraduate courses in my case, and across two in that of my colleague. In other words, we have attempted to integrate an element of role-play into the teaching of undergraduates at all stages in the curriculum, and to conduct a ‘control’ experiment by introducing the next cohort of students to the same

⁶ H. Gorvine, ‘Teaching history through role playing’, *The History Teacher*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1970, p. 16.

⁷ K.N. McDaniel, ‘Four elements of successful historical role-playing in the classroom’, *The History Teacher*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2000, p. 357.

⁸ H. Clarkeburn, et al, ‘Education research: teaching biology students transferable skills’, *Journal of Biological Education*, 34, 2000 and D. Laveault and P. Corbeil, ‘Assessing the impact of simulation games on learning: a step-by-step approach’, *Simulations/Games for Learning*, 20, 1, 1990.

topic through a different format to try to isolate the difference that the role-play exercise itself makes. Through reading the literature on role-play in history teaching, we sought initially to adopt what was regarded as best practice, which involved minimising the performative element and avoiding a theatrical division between role-players and audience.⁹

Role-play exercises

	Trish Skinner (medievalist)	Joan Tumblety (later modern France)
Year 1	Siege of Antioch (First Crusade)	Trial of Louis XVI (French Revolution)
Year 2	Being a medieval man (Gender in the Middle Ages)	Feminist congress of 1900 (Gender and society in France since 1789)
Year 3	-	<i>Sorrow and the Pity</i> documentary (Defeat and Occupation, 1940-44)

Our attempts to evaluate this difference have had only the veneer of scientific method: in each case we have felt that, as practising historians and teachers, the best way of assessing the role-play elements has been to compare the experience of apparent student engagement in the classes in question in the light of our broader teaching experiences; and to discuss our impression of each other’s role-play experiments through observation of them. Our evaluation is thus subjective and impressionistic – a kind of anthropological amateurism – although we have also tried to quantify the impact of role-play on students’ engagement, enjoyment and academic performance by distributing questionnaires, and by tracking the percentage take-up of the role-play topics in later essays and exams as well as student performance in that assessment. Our initial suspicions have broadly been borne out by our later experiments: role-play is a highly effective means to increase the quantity and quality of student participation in discussion and to increase students close engagement with primary source material. It may also, in some contexts but not in others, lead to an increased student interest in a topic (measured by significantly higher take-up rates in essay on the Year 2 topics for both the medieval and later modern periods). But it does not measurably, and in isolation, appear to improve students’ understanding of that topic (cf. French Revolution quiz results which showed little memory of precise debates put forward in the trial of Louis XVI) or their broader contextual understanding of issues addressed

⁹ M. Van Ments, *The Effective use of role-play: a handbook for teachers and trainers*, (1983) and C. Freestone, *Using role play as an educational strategy*, (1978)

in the course (cf. uneven treatment of role-play topic in exam for Year 2 Being a medieval man). Neither does there appear to be a strong correlation between reference made to the role-play topic in assessment and higher marks.

In 2002 our LTSN conference paper focused on the difference between role-play and advocacy and on issues of performativity; in 2003 the paper focused on the impact of role-play on student preparation and academic performance later in the course. I'll revisit some of these questions shortly in the light of what our experience tells us about running topics as role-play exercises in comparison with running them in traditional seminar format. This year, however, we want to tie the ends together and draw general conclusions about the place of role-play exercises in the university undergraduate seminar: *what have we learned about using role-play (and how will we incorporate it into our teaching in future)? Are some historical scenarios better suited to a role-play treatment than others, and, if so, which and why?*

What have we learned about role-play?

- Excellent for increasing student participation in discussion and for managing larger seminar groups (supported by the general literature);
- Ideally suited to increasing close engagement with primary source material;
- May lead to greater student interest in the topic but almost certainly does not lead to better academic performance in itself.

In fact, we've learned that it is virtually impossible to single out the variable of role-play in measuring student performance:

In an attempt to measure the impact of role-play on students' understanding we mapped their choice of essay and exam topics, and noted their marks in this assessment. Given the differing nature of the assessment on our various undergraduate courses, however, it was inevitable that some students' choice was freer than others. Year 1 students tend to choose an essay topic from a limited, prescribed list that does not overtly feature the role-play topic, and Year 3 students negotiate their essay questions and dissertations before the role-play takes place. In every case, none of my own students had the option to write exclusively on the topic of the role-play due to the nature of the essays required – the closest they came was being able to write on

the Terror of 1793-4, first-wave feminism in the late 19th century, or 1960s-70s revisionist accounts of the French experience under Occupation in the Second World War. Due to the more open and extended nature of the essay in Year 2 (compared to Year 1) yet its expected links to material directly discussed in class time (in contrast to Year 3), it is the second-year course that would seem to provide the best opportunity to students to follow up the role-play topic through assessed work.

At first glance, the element of role-play for both medieval and later modern courses appears to have fired up student interest in the role-play topics, with a markedly high take-up of related matters in the essay. In the Year 2 feminist congress role-play cohort, for example, 24% of students (with marks ranging from 48 to 80) wrote their extended essays on the history of feminism, a topic that students on this course have tended to avoid (only 5% in 1997-8 wrote on feminism). Only one of these essays did not mobilise the congress as an example, and all discussed it very effectively. In fact, the average mark for these essays was 63%, against an average essay mark for the whole cohort of 61%, although I suspect that no meaningful conclusion can be drawn from this comparison of marks. No doubt the higher-scoring students reaped the benefits of a semester's worth of diligent reading and thinking. Their sensitivity to the significance of the role-play topic in the wider context of the history of feminism was probably a function of a greater ability to mobilise pertinent examples from lecture and seminar material, as well as from primary and secondary sources, in order to construct a convincing argument.¹⁰ In any case, the three students (16%) in the Year 2 control group who chose to write their extended essays on first-wave feminism were less likely to mention the feminist congress of 1900: two essays ignored the event altogether while the student who gained the highest mark among these essays (65 – the others were 63 and 52) discussed it to good effect. What strikes me when looking at the essays on the history of feminism is that both the role-play cohort and control group cohort discussed the topic with far more contextual nuance and sophistication,

¹⁰ In any case, there has been a steady upward drift in the choice of the history of feminism as an essay topic for this course: from a mere 5% of essays in 1997-8, the figure has risen to 24% in 2001-2 (for the role-play cohort), 16% in 2002-3 (for the control cohort), and has reached the dizzying heights of 30% in the current academic year, 2003-4. The sharpest increase does coincide with the introduction of the role-play element in 2001-2, but the relatively high figure was sustained for the subsequent year when no role-play took place. Perhaps it was the choice of the feminist congress as a case study, whether role-played or not, that helps to explain this apparently sudden increase of interest in the history of feminism. For what it's worth, I re-introduced role-play, albeit in a truncated and less structured form, for the current cohort.

and with a far greater willingness to name feminists and their organisations by name, than has been the case in the past, which leads me to conclude, if anything, that it is our extended seminar discussion of the congress as a case study, and not the element of role-play, which allows students the chance to make sense of the topic and to choose it as the subject of their extended essay.

No exam question in any of my courses specifically asked about the role-play topic, but was based, again, on broader themes: in order to develop a good argument in response to the questions, students may have chosen to include an aspect of the role-play topic as an example, but need not necessarily have done so. In the Year 2 feminist congress role-play cohort, a small proportion of students (15%) tackled the exam question on first-wave feminism – with results ranging from 50 to 70 – with two of these students mentioning the congress to good effect and the other ignoring it. Of the two Year 2 control-group students (11%) who tackled first-wave feminism in the exam the following year, one did not mention the feminist congress of 1900 at all and the other, although mentioning it, did not note that the 1900 congress was the first time that support of suffrage rights for women had been tabled as a proposal by the feminist organisation in question. Strikingly, however, a student who mentioned the congress effectively in the role-play cohort actually scored much less well (50) on this question than the student in the control cohort who mentioned the congress less effectively (60). Including the congress as an effective example within the argument was thus no clear determinant of a good score. What we can conclude from our study of how student exam choices may have been affected by the role-play exercises is that students generally were much less likely to tackle a question on issues relating to that topic than they initially suggested they might be, given their questionnaire responses.¹¹ Furthermore, there was no appreciable difference in quality evidenced

¹¹ We have incomplete results here: of the 83% in Trial of Louis XVI control cohort who said they would seriously consider answering an exam question on the topic, some 23% did a related question in which they mobilised the trial of the King as an example. In the Year 2 feminist congress example, 40% of the role-play cohort said they might write an exam answer on it as opposed to the 15% that actually did; and in the control cohort some 67% considered writing on the congress topic in the exam whereas only 11% did. The take up for the Year 3 role-play cohort was far higher – some 36% actually wrote on the wider topic of the role-play (and mentioned the film as an example) as opposed to the 57% who claimed to be seriously considering doing so. The higher proportion here may be explained by the fact that students must answer three questions in Year 3 (in Year 1 it is one and in Year 2 two), so there were fewer questions that could be avoided and, in addition, the film that was the role-play topic in Year 3 had a greater significance in the wider course than was the case in the other two later modern examples. That helps enormously to explain the enduring popularity of the topic and the film in

between the exam responses of those students in the role-play cohort and those in the control cohort when writing on the role-play-related question (the average exam mark on feminism for both my Year 2 cohorts was 59%), and the mark awarded did not seem dependent on whether the role-play example had been incorporated into the exam answer.¹²

Equally problematical as a means of acquiring meaningful objective information about student performance was my decision to circulate to both cohorts of the Year 1 French Revolution students a quiz focusing on the period of the fall of the monarchy and the establishment of the Republic in autumn 1792, and the ensuing development of the Terror – the period in which Louis XVI was tried and executed. The quiz formed part of the revision seminar at the end of the course and my aim was to see if students had been able to make connections between the nature of the trial and the development of political factions in the National Convention. In both cohorts, the questions the students answered best were those pertaining directly to the King himself (the charges brought against Louis), and not those that were more conceptually challenging (the nature of the arguments put forward at the trial), or those that required greater contextual understanding (various revolutionaries' professional backgrounds or the development of the Terror). In any case, the scores for both cohorts were almost identical, and indeed poor: the role-play cohort scored an average of 43% and the control cohort 42%. I found the quiz such a blunt instrument in measuring the effect of the role-play exercise that I did not use it for either of my other role-play experiments.

The student responses provided through questionnaires generally provide a better guide to the effectiveness of role-play than this attempt to draw conclusions from student choice and performance in essay and exam. At least there we can learn, in their own words, how students felt about the teaching and learning environment, and

question in exam answers: the introduction of the role-play element seems not to have affected the likelihood of students on this course writing about the film. Trish Skinner reported a very high take-up of the related exam question in the case of her Year 2 Being a medieval man role-play.

¹² I am referring explicitly here to the Year 2 feminist congress example. Note that the average score overall on this course has, since the mid-1990s, hovered around the 60% mark, so it would seem that each cohort is composed of students of roughly similar scholarly ability. Trish Skinner notes that not all exam discussion pertaining to the Year 2 Being a medieval man role-play topic was pertinent to answering the question.

consequently we can deduce which elements of the exercise (or its control counterpart) were perceived to be most helpful to students' learning. In this area, our initial suppositions were borne out: students like the structure that a role-play exercise offers, and the accompanying higher participation rates in the discussion; they like the way in which a close engagement with primary sources allows a deeper understanding of the concerns and thought processes of the historical actors involved and consequently makes conceptual issues (or, alternatively, the density of detail) easier to understand. As far as students were concerned, the role-plays seem to have been effective in humanising the past and in making comprehensible views and actions that would otherwise seem alien to them. Year 1 students on the Siege of Antioch liked the opportunity to 'give faces to medieval names' and those on the Year 3 documentary film role-play noted that it made it easy for them to 'empathise with opinions such as collaboration'. Indeed, Harold Gorvine concluded some time ago from his own teaching experience that role-play exercises are especially useful for topics concerning issues and decisions that students find 'immoral', such as the American government's decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan in 1945. As he points out, '[t]he aim is not to get them either to agree or disagree with what was done; they will do that in any case. Rather, this kind of role playing may enable them to understand why these men concluded at the time that such a decision was necessary.'¹³ In all cases, our students also pointed to the more relaxed and informal atmosphere that many thought characterised the role-play session (perhaps ironically, since those sessions were probably more structured than regular seminars). The least popular elements of role-play concerned absenteeism among students, a lack of time for discussion and the slight frustration involved in having researched only one point of view. Yet, in all cases, it would seem that the enlivening effect that the role-play exercise had on the seminar environment heavily outweighed the latter concern.

What do the student responses in the control cohorts tell us about the ingredients for a good seminar? Do they allow us to isolate the role-play element in determining the answer to that question? For the control group experiences for which we have questionnaire results at this point, it is interesting to note that the case-study format of the seminar seems itself to have been highly valued by students. Year 1 students

¹³ H. Gorvine, 'Teaching history through role playing', *The History Teacher*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1970, p. 16.

trying Louis XVI liked the ‘good sense of the time and people involved’ and the level of ‘class interaction’, those imagining the feminist congress in Year 2 thought that the focus to the seminar topic helped to explain the confusing aspects of feminism and feminists’ positions, and those considering the nature of the controversial historical documentary in Year 3 liked the small group discussion and understanding of context that talking about a single film and its reception allowed.¹⁴ In other words, it would seem that students respond particularly well to a structured case-study approach which functions as a microcosm for the exploration of broader issues. Above all, they like a seminar environment in which all students – and not just the predictable few – are actively engaged in discussion. Perhaps, then, it is not the role-play element *per se* which pleases students, but the way in which a task-based and structured approach generally draws more students into the discussion, perhaps by increasing the sense of group responsibility among individual students. One striking figure in these responses – for both medieval and later modern courses – was that in all cases bar one (Year 3), the students in the control cohorts showed no interest whatsoever in introducing a role-play element in future. Yet, when introduced to role-play, student response indicates a significantly higher level of enjoyment overall when compared to regular seminars.¹⁵

Are some historical scenarios better suited to role-play than others?

What do the student responses tell us about whether some historical topics or scenarios lend themselves better to a role-play treatment than others? Did the students taking the medieval courses respond differently from those studying later modern topics? In general, there was no discernible difference between the responses of each

¹⁴ See, in addition, how some in the Year 2 feminist congress control group found the ‘subject matter confusing’ and that they got the protagonists’ names mixed up: this was not mentioned among the ‘worst thing’ about the seminar for the role-play cohort.

¹⁵ With the Year 3 documentary film control group, I in fact improvised a very small role-play scenario by asking them to imagine how a communist or Gaullist audience might have responded to the film (‘imagine you go to see it as a PCF member...what would you make of it?’). Note that one student singled out this feature of thinking through how various audiences would have received the film as the best part of the seminar. Some 50% of the control group for the Year 3 documentary film found the idea of role-play appealing, perhaps because the seminar topic (exploring the viewpoints of various interviewees in a controversial documentary) is more obviously suited to role-play than some of the others. Or was the students’ more favourable attitude to role-play because they were more mature finalists, or that the familiar and safe environment of the special subject made them more willing to take perceived risks? In this, as in all cases, it is perhaps impossible to isolate the role-play element *per se* as a variable in explaining student response to a given seminar discussion.

category of students. In fact, the student comments on the questionnaires in particular suggested that both groups of students liked and disliked exactly the same features of the role-play and control group seminars. Were there, in any case, significant differences in how the medievalist and later modernist role-plays were constructed?

As explained in an earlier version of this paper, none of our role-plays was intended to be a re-enactment of an actual historical event, but all but one were based on such events - the exception being the Year 2 Being a medieval man role-play which asked students to identify with three male historical actors and to imagine how codes of masculinity in public and private life had affected their lives. From what I can gather, it is far more usual for history role-plays to involve imagined yet plausible scenarios than documented events, and to be based overtly on encouraging students to make a decision or resolve a crisis while taking into account the kinds of institutional, political, economic and interpersonal constraints that acted upon agents in the past.¹⁶ Some practitioners may try to mix these quite distinct approaches: in order to keep alive a sense of historical uncertainty in a role-play that was otherwise attempting to recreate American high political discussions in 1941, Harold Gorvine told his class that the Japanese had just attacked a Dutch possession in the Pacific rather than Pearl Harbour.¹⁷ As I suggested in 2002, I wonder whether there is a tension in role-play scenarios in which students are dealing with documented events and processes: how does a tutor build in flexibility and uncertainty (perhaps necessary to counteract the sense of historical inevitability) if the documented outcomes are already established and known?¹⁸

Perhaps because we have dealt mainly in 'real scenarios', it seems to me at any rate that our role-plays have focused less on the *resolution* of conflict than on the

¹⁶ See the experiments presented in N.R. Miner, 'Simulation and role-playing in the teaching of East Asian history', *The History Teacher*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1977; K.N. McDaniel, 'Four elements of successful historical role-playing in the classroom', *The History Teacher*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2000; H.E. Karjala and R.E. White, 'American history through music and role play', *The History Teacher*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1983.

¹⁷ H. Gorvine, 'Teaching history through role playing', *The History Teacher*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1970, p. 15.

¹⁸ Tony Webster at Edge Hill uses a fictional scenario in his role-play precisely in order to avoid a confusion of real and imagined historical outcomes. 'A fictional situation allows students to explore the political dynamics of a complex imperial crisis, without becoming muddled about the sequence and consequence of actual events.' *Imperial crisis! A role play game of empire and politics*. Harold Gorvine thinks the best way to guard against this confusion is to ensure that students do as much background reading as possible in advance of the role-play. H. Gorvine, 'Teaching history through role playing', *The History Teacher*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1970, p. 19.

understanding of conflict. Pedagogically, I suppose that these two approaches are quite different: in the former, students learn about processes (of government, of custom and ritual, of sociability) in order to understand the possible scope of a historical protagonist's action in a given set of circumstances, while in the latter they learn about positions actually taken by historical protagonists (in a debate or trial, in times of war, in politics) in order to understand the reasons for those positions. Whatever the style of role-play adopted, I would tend to agree with Kathryn McDaniel's four rules for a good role-play session in history: that the students have background knowledge of the topic, however superficial, but preferably through reading sources; that the role-play is based on an 'adversarial relationship'; that it is based around a 'focal point for debate' and that the tutor intervenes only minimally in order to ensure flexibility for the students.¹⁹ It is sometimes difficult, however, to avoid a good deal of tutorial intervention: what I think is of prime importance is to ensure that all students are involved in the discussion.

A central feature of our role-plays has been giving students access to primary source material directly related to the scenario. It may be that it is the nature of the source material that determines how well suited to role-play is a given historical event or scenario. From my own role-play experience, I think that the role-play sessions (and indeed the case-study control seminars without role-play) worked best when students got a real sense that they were putting different pieces of a jigsaw together, and the availability of primary sources (in translation) that permitted different perspectives on the same issue or event helped to build that sense. For example, the most effective sources for the Trial of Louis XVI seemed to me to be the speeches that were made in the National Convention by deputies in December 1792, arguing either in defence or condemnation of the King. Those students who were representing the views of aristocrats who had recorded their horror at news of the gory death of Louis probably felt more distant from the proceedings of the role-play than those representing Saint-Just as he made his extraordinary maiden speech in the Manège. Yet it may be that the relationship of the protagonists to the drama is more important than the quality of primary sources available: the students in the Year 2 feminist congress role-play who represented Louise Saumoneau (the socialist heckler) and Marguerite Durand (a

¹⁹ K.N McDaniel, 'Four elements of successful historical role-playing in the classroom', *The History Teacher*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2000, p. 359.

congress organiser) probably got more out of the role-play element itself than those representing Léon Richer or Maria Deraismes (feminists who had either died or retired by 1900), despite the fact that more primary sources were available for the latter than the former. I think, in any case, that it also helps to provide portraits or photographs of any actually existing historical protagonists, as such things serve mnemonically as highly effective visual anchors. Illustrations of the venues or landscapes against which the role-play scenario is supposed to be unfolding also help to build a sense of immediacy for the students and to illuminate something of what was possible or likely to occur given the physical constraints of the environment.

Conclusion: how will we use role-play in future?

- More often, although perhaps in a more *ad hoc* and spontaneous way (eg. kicking off a seminar by asking students to imagine a scenario and to work out how a certain protagonist or social group might have responded).
- Once or twice in a course in a more structured way (with reading preparation involved) in order to break the usual seminar format, to focus attention more specifically on primary sources and to increase student involvement. All of these elements are reasons in themselves to incorporate role-play on a regular basis, even if students show no discernible scholarly improvement as a result of the role-play exercises.